



Poetry in Punjabi Women Poets

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Not very long in the past, girls used to write poetry on the sly hiding it from their parents and the public. In many Muslim-dominated cultures this practice still prevails. News of young girls, expressing love in poetry or in love letters being done to death in countries like Afghanistan still fills newspapers columns. The picture is not very different even now in some parts of India, although the situation is not so bad. But whatever be the land or gender, and whatever be the consequences, the human heart cannot stop beating with love or beating for love. Poetry usually carries verbal expressions of pangs, moans, groans, bouts of ecstasies or of depression which form the usual template of women and men in love or suffering requited love.

As to the current scene of women's poetry, we see that women, of late, are coming to dominate the poetic space, for poetry is like second skin to most of those in love or those jilted in love. More so, poetry lends immediacy to matters of the heart.

It is heartening to see that a young Punjabi girl, Rupri Kaur, has stolen the scene worldwide, with her self-published book *Milk and Honey* (2014) which when later published by Andrews McNeil Publishing sold well over a million copies

Rupri Kaur says in one her interviews, "I want to put words to feelings we have trouble putting into words." And at another place she says, "Like the breath before the kiss, I want to make the mundane beautiful."

The current scenario of Punjabi poetry written by women looks bright with so many young and mature women poets writing. Fifty years back, it was not so. We had only Amrita Pritam. Born and raised in the Pakistani side of undivided Punjab, she was only 28 when she came over to reside in Dehradun and afterwards in New Delhi. Her poem 'Today I call upon Waris Shah' is considered the most powerful poetic take on the brutal killings of innocent people on both sides of the border. In that poem, she had invoked the legendary balladeer, Waris Shah to pen the sufferings of lakhs of daughters so eloquently as he had done with the agony of Heer on her separation from her lover, Ranjha. This poem published right after the partition had instantly caught peoples' imagination all over India and had made Amrita Pritam famous overnight. Although she has written several best-selling novels like *Pinjar* which went on to become a very successful movie on the theme of partition, but her popularity rests primarily on her breaking the traditional grounds of thinking and living. With her book, *Kagaz te Canvas*, she became the first woman poet to write and popularize free verse in Punjabi.

After Amrita, the gap was filled to some extent by Manjit Tiwana who brought new sensibility and language to poetry giving expression to the superfluous and flimsy nature of love of young Punjabi city bred girls so finely expressed in her poem, *Girls*, given below showing how they come out of their age-old grooves frolicking and merrymaking with their new-found freedom and empowerment. Her poetry foreshadows irony and devises suitable words-weapons to combat the age old traditional modes of living and thinking. It is first time

the girls are learning to lead and enjoy life openly and on their own terms. With satire inbuilt in her poems, her book, Unidra Waratman for which she was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award, portrayed a funny but grim picture of the tension-filled, restless modern way of life.

Girls:

Some girls are long route buses
who do not take short route passengers
Some girls are Banarsi sarees
looking at whom even once, bores you
Some girls are golden framed photos
which may adore any drawing room

Some girls are lyrics
they get more amiable with every read
Some are westerly winds
who walk away speechless
quivering the cords of your heart

Some girls are butterflies
who for some young passion of theirs's
end up imprisoned in the pages of years
Some girls are fledgling sandal trees
who muster the guts of taming the snakes
Some girls are conscience
who demand the accounting for
wrongsdone to them
and land up hung on the cross of their bodies
Some girls are ghazals sung by Begum Akhtar
who are liked by so very few

At present so many other younger women are writing poetry although none of them, except Vaneeta, has won the coveted Sahitya Academy Award so far. Vaneeta's poetry highlights the plight of human beings caught in the existential web of life. Her poetry is rather cerebral, born of dissent or dissatisfaction with the reality and condition of life at hand. She has, indeed, brought a somber sensibility to Punjabi poetry. In her poem, Sidharath, she addresses to Gautama The Buddha to change places with Yashodra, his wife, to attain a new kind of wisdom or nirvana.

This time
You would not go for nirvana
Yashoda would do that.
She feels ill
confined in the colorful walls
of your palace
Every color of those colossal walls
for her is drab
It saddens her

This time Yashodra

will place a beautiful
flower upon your lap
Do not be afraid
You achieved so much
Maybe, you will regain this knowledge too
looking at her
disappearing with hersad steps
you will reach one more
truth that endures

What did you attain
under the bodhi tree
I don't know
Yashodra will seek nirvana
under that tree
Surrendering the pleasures of the palace
putting a little flower
upon your lap
she will go to seek nirvana
leaving you to attain thenewborn truth

Next, we come to Nirupama Dutt. She is well-versed and self-reliant poet who writes both in English and Punjabi. When it comes to writing poems, she invariably takes to Punjabi, although later she usually trans-creates her poems in English for facility of their rapid journey across languages. Making poetic mock confessions, she celebrates joys, pains and gifts of her self-won carefree mode of life. Her poems grow out of her bid to get the most out of life. Brazen courage and grit mark her poetry. More so, her poems gain an easy flow soft on our nerves. Ek Nadi Sanwli Jehi, her maiden book of poetry, is generally viewed as trend setter in Punjabi poetry. Here is her poem, Dusky Girl.

A dusky girl nurtures
dreams, all fair- complexioned
and her truth is very drab
She is born
steeped in sorrow
the colour of which you cannot name
Her sorrow borrowing
its nature from water
wells up her eyes
It wallows in the red wounds
of her dusky body
She hides her ink in lacs of symbols
of anguish wedded to her color
and gets duskier
Her dreams fly far like black geese
and bring her a morsel of warm light
A dusky girl
undergoes every fair-complexioned crime
and nurtures a hope

for a fair-complexioned child of her
A dusky girl's dreams
are very fair-complexioned
and her truth very dark

Manjit Indira has many volumes of poetry to her credit. Her poetry is marked by explicit lyrical intensity and womanly expression of warmth, love, care and the play of tragedy and comedy in man- woman relations. Her poetic strength lies in evoking home-grown words full of tender connotations and allusions to Punjabi folklore.

Paul Kaur has of late come to her forte exhibiting rare courage in revolt against horde of injustices strewn in life. Her poems tend toward becoming a rallying point against social ills plaguing the society and the woman. Inequalities in distribution of wealth, discriminatory and unjust treatment based on differences of gender, language, religion, color, race and economic condition are themes most common to her. Love, separation, loss, bad faith, double talk, betrayal and remorse are other concerns her poems are usually built around. Existential anguish and loneliness informs her poetry no less. Gentle humor and satire lend marked intensity to her poems. Let us share a bit of her talent:

Khabbal

I have heard
that when I was born
someone, looking at me, had
turned his face away
and, someone, had turned his back to evade
his looking at me
As they say, the newborn child
recognizes the turban of his father
in just twenty-one days,
I had recognized the averted eyes of my father
that very moment.
I had gone accustomed
to recognize and bear
the averting of people's eyes
from looking at me
And whenever I filled my eyes
with fury for all this
I wrote the alphabet of my ire
on their averted faces
which they never could decipher

Her Another poem, Measuring cloth for my size, seems to make light of her body size.

I once donned quite a loose garb
but I felt squeezed in it
difficult to take a wholesome breath

When he met
I cut the extra cloth off

to make to my body size
but again,
my body measurements changed
I felt trapped
in my dress

Sometimes I feel
That I should lay hold of these
cut pieces and sew them up
with my dress
but what use this
shriveled dress would be

Now I feel I should
discard this
and donning a shawl over me
make my body transcend
my dress measurements

Sukhwinder Amrit is yet another important poet to watch. She has written many books of poetry. Her poetry mainly consists of ghazals. Rhyme and rhythm with an assortment of exquisite images bearing romantic overtones are central to poetry. Her ghazals are rich in emotional appeal due to the subtle turn of phrase, apt descriptions, variety of images and skillful use of figures of speech. Her ghazals ring of love, passion, tenderness of feelings and grace. Below is an example of her free verse which too is quite near to the spirit of a sonnet.

I will not depart

I will not depart
from you like this
as a pale leaf
falls off a tree branch
I will take much more time
to take my leave of you
I will keep attuned to your silence
for long
I will seethe in your frosted seasons
will flicker in your dusks
stumble like a shadow on your paths

The dust of my illusions
will fly to fill up your eyes
My feathers will keep scattering
over your voids
I will keep gasping like a wounded bird
on your branch
each drop of me
getting cleansed by you

I will take my leave

from your universe
atom by atom
I will drop from your pen
word by word

Each image of me
will throb in your memory
before I depart
will groan too much in pain
in your waters
like a fish

And then at last
taking my departure
I will hide somewhere
in some curve of your breaths
I will take long to depart

Neetu Arora, Sarabjeet Kaur Sohal, Bhupinder Kaur Preet, Bipan Preet, Simrat Gagan, Deep Inder, Amia Kunwar, Kana Singh, Surjit Bains, Surjeet Sakhi, Rajinder Kaur, Gurminder Sidhu, Amarjit Ghuman, Aman C Singh, and Taran Gujral are other women poets who have produced an encouraging body of work. All are well-known in the Punjabi literary circles. Almost all of them have published more than one or two of their books of poetry recently. Rafugar by Bipan Preet, The Hi Kitey by Neetu Arora and Khataas by Deep Inder have just arrived. Here are poems by Simrat Gagan, Neetu Arora, Bipan Preet and Aman C. Singh.

Simrat Gagan

Pain

Pain
Kept visiting me
As a pilgrim
Visits a shrine

The waiting
Kept its journey on
Troubles kept on pacing up
The flowers kept withering
The Thirst
Kept doubling up
Wells kept drawing water
Rains kept showering
The meanings
Kept changing
Becoming spectacles,
Love
Kept expanding
Deeper earthward,
Higher, skyward

Neetu Arora

My Loss

I have abandoned
all my math books
because every time
their fixed formulae
gave the fixed answer
No desired spot
could be reached
walking my way

Everything happened
as the formula
decreed
all sum rendered
meaningless
and the solution
like an eternal truth

I came to abhor
formulae
Freed, I got mobbed by definitions
When I countered and rebutted them
they returned with too many sums, results

Now whenever I spot the answers
I cannot reach the prime sum

Devising formulae to my liking
I have lost what I had

What formula
I applied to what sum
everything turned upside down
To whatever sum
I did add or subtract from
divided or multiplied
I remember not

Applying my formulas
did not yield the results intended
I have lost my prime sum
Now how I am to deal with the answers

I will meet you like this

By Bipan Preet

I will catch at, and wear
upon my head, the golden
rays of the sun
adorning your body.

I will drink in the atoms of your
pure breaths dancing upon your lips
and live for a while by those moments

I will close my eyes
and look upon you
with closed eyes

As one goes into deep meditation
I will roam in the realm
of each atom of your body
and would swim across the seas
of your feelings

I will melt into your rhythms

I will join in the souls
and donning the attire of spotlessness
undergo a new life

And, then, I would
scatter myself upon you

letter by letter
word by word
line by line

Whenever I would meet you
I would like to meet with you
the same way

As for poetry by Punjabi women living abroad, there is a lot of literary activity in Canada and other countries. So many Punjabi LekhakSabhas function in all the big cities in Canada. More than two dozen Punjabi Newspapers, most of them weeklies, are published in Canada, USA, England and Australia. Among women poets in those lands, Surjit Kalsi comes at the top for the sheer number and quality of her poetry. She has done translations from and into English. She is well-versed in both. Other women poets include Hem Jyoti, Neeru Aseem, Surjit Kaur, Gurmeet Panag, Sandip Dhanoa, Sandip Chauhan, Rani Nagender, Sandy Gill, Surinder Kaur, Paramjeet Deol and quite a few others. Surjit Kaur and Neeru Aseem have more than two books of poetry to their credit and they both have shown remarkable poetic talent in their work. Most of Neeru Aseem's poems have already been translated into English and published

in her book, 'If'. Very creative and innovative, her poems are delightfully enigmatic for their elusiveness and depth. The poem below is redolent of her evocative poetic ease:
Homebrewed Red Wine

Home brewed red wine
A cold evening
The deck, the fire pit
Barbecue, sons, the husband
And the Polish husband wife
From neighborhood
Small talk
Mind content and at peace
And our small world
At this moment
Recreating
From ruptures

Gurden Chauhan is the editor of the journal *South Asian Ensemble* published from Canada and India